DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 198 TE 002 778

AUTHOR Marckwardt, Albert H.
TITLE The Concept of Standard English.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 24p.; A lecture contained in The Discovery of English (Urbana: NCTE, 1971: 13-36

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Comparative Analysis; *Concept Formation; Dialects; *English; *Language Development; Models; Social Change; *Social Influences; Speech Habits; Standards; *Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS England; United States

ABSTRACT

The basic scope of this document is a study of the emergence of a linguistic standard for England. It is stated that this was essentially an unconscious process, a recognition of an existing social situation, which took place during the 15th century. A differentiation is made between speech characterized as standard and that characterized as model. The former is simply a statement of fact, whereas the latter is regarded as having acquired such prestige that it is considered as essential to professional performance and to social and economic advancement. A dialect usually achieves the status of a standard before it becomes accepted as a model. This is defined as a transition from the realm of unconscious acceptance to that of conscious prescription. It is pointed out that at no period in the development of English was the linguistic standard as absolute and monolithic as is often assumed. The Londoner, living during the reign of the first Elizabeth, had certain choices not available to his twentieth-century counterpart in the time of Elizabeth II, and vice versa. Standard English, it is emphasized, can only be understood in the perspective of its long development and the forces which shaped it. Social utility was the dominant force which shaped the standard at the outset, and the language has continued to be responsive to the demands of a constantly changing social situation. (Author/CK)

ED 059198

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

The Concept of Standard English

Albert H. Marckwardt

TE 002 778

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY A. H. MARCKWARDT AND NAT'L. COUN. TEACH/ENGL.
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

ALBERT H. MARCKWARDT, a leading authority on the history and structure of the English language, joined the Princeton University faculty in 1963 after 35 years on the faculty of the University of Michigan. As Paton Foundation Professor of Ancient and Modern Literature at Princeton, Marckwardt also teaches graduate courses in American dialects and general linguistics. A native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, he received his A.B., A.M., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Michigan. Dr. Marckwardt's professional activities include the directorship of the 1966 Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English at Dartmouth College. A recipient of NCTE's 1970 David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English and the 1961 Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award at the University of Michigan, he has been president of the Linguistic Society of America and the American Dialect Society. He has held Fulbright lectureships at the Universities of Vienna and Gras, Austria, and has served as State Department consultant on teaching English in Colombia, Panama, Italy, and Eastern Europe. A frequent contributor to professional journals, he is the author of *American English* and *Linguistics and the Teaching of English* and editor of *Language and Language Learning* and *Linguistics in School Programs*. His extensive work for NCTE includes its presidency in 1967 and, currently, chairmanship of the Committee on the Structure of the Council.

We have been talking about standard English for sixty years or more, but there is much disheartening evidence to show that the impact has been slight at best. When those who concoct the Winston cigarette advertisements can succeed in making a mountain out of what is in essence a grammatical molehill, and then dismissing not only it but an entire concern with language as a triviality, there is something unsound and uninformed about the public attitude toward language—to say nothing of its taste. When the superintendent of public instruction of the most populous state in the union—now fortunately retired by the electorate—can insist, "I say that there is only one way to write correct English, only one way to pronounce English words properly, only one way to punctuate sentences right, and only one way to conjugate verbs, compare adjectives, and identify parts of speech," it is again evident that the notion of a linguistic standard reflected here is rudimentary and ill-founded. Standard English is something we need to continue talking about, especially those of us who are going to have to deal with it in the schools.

Let us begin with the recognition that language is a form of social behavior. True enough, it has its individual side as well, but we cannot avoid recognizing language as the medium which makes possible the cooperation of human beings in a society. It is the very fabric of the social garment, so to speak.

Fundamental though language is to any human society, it is but one of many forms of behavior operative in a social order and shares certain qualities common to all of them. Mankind has always attempted to formulate customs and habits into a fixed system. The norms thus established become so much a part of the unconsciously accepted set of values of a society that one assumes that they are universally accepted and shared. Conformity tends to be the rule; violation incurs social penalties. This is what occurs with respect to all our social customs, our dress, our daily manners, our morals, and indeed our language. They are all characterized by more or less regularized systems of conduct, each

of these with its own particular history.

As far as I know, there has been little study of the way in which various forms or patterns of non-linguistic behavior acquire the prestige which makes for their acceptance as a norm or standard for the entire culture, or even for a socially or geographically delimited portion of it. Certainly environmental factors play a part. One may readily guess that it was the altitude of Mexico City which originally determined the early afternoon as the time for the principal meal. Like Macbeth, dinner at eight would murder sleep. It seems evident that in all societies certain approved conventions prevail out of pure tradition long after the necessity or reason for them has passed: witness the vents in the rear of men's jackets and the buttons on their sleeves. Consequently, there is no reason to suppose that either the influence of environment or that of tradition can be dismissed from our thinking when we come to deal with language.

Let us now turn specifically to language matters, but, looking beyond the boundaries of the English speech community, consider the Western European languages as a whole. In no Western European country did a vernacular language have more than a limited sphere of usefulness during the Middle Ages. The language of the church was Latin. Learned works, both scientific and philosophical, were written in Latin. The language of diplomacy and government was Latin. By the fifteenth century, however, the Church was being challenged by the Reformation, and an important point at issue was the availability of the Bible in the various native tongues. Learning had shifted from the monasteries to the universities, with some of the lectures at least being delivered in the native language. The breakdown of feudalism and the emergence of national states as a replacement for the strangely mixed patchwork of feudal holdings was perhaps the most decisive force in giving a new importance to national language as well as to other manifestations of a national culture.

In each of these countries there had been a period when a

number of regional dialects, all thriving and flourishing, had been in competition with one another. France had its *langue d'oc* and its *langue d'oil*. In Italy there were the dialects of Rome, of Naples, of Venice, of Florence. In Spain the dialects of Castile and Leon were in competition with those of Galicia, Aragon, and Andalucia. In the Netherlands, the speech of the inland manufacturing towns rivalled that of the coastal shipping centers. In England there had been one school of writers who employed the East Midland dialect, a group of lyric poets who used the speech of the West Midland counties, and some composers of romances who wrote in the dialect of the North.

But in each country, the beginning of the fifteenth century saw the emergence of one regional dialect as the standard or generally accepted norm. In Italy it was the speech of Florence, in Spain that of Castile—the usage of Toledo in particular—in France the language of the Ile de France, the area surrounding Paris. The dialect of London became the standard in England. It requires little inspired detection to discover the reason for each of these developments; they are obvious. In every instance the dialect which emerged as the basis for the standard was that which was politically, economically, socially, and culturally dominant in the nation or the total language community.

Nor should we be led to overemphasize the cultural factor, narrowly speaking, in these developments. It is true that Dante wrote in Tuscan Italian, but Florence under the Medici was also a center of economic power and political influence. The same observation must be made of England, where during the turbulent years of Norman domination, the power base had shifted from Winchester to London. Indeed, we cannot escape the conclusion that the development of a national standard language, whether in England, France, or elsewhere, was nothing more than the reflection of an already existing situation, a selection of one of several possibilities on the basis of social utility.

Social utility comes into play in another way as well. In a

recent treatment of this matter, John H. Fisher has asserted that the model for the emergent standard was not, despite the expression that rolls off the lips so easily, the king's English. In the first place, he points out that the phrase "suggests an exclusive, hereditary principle which is anathema to our society. Furthermore," he continues, "the phrase is inaccurate. The kings of England have seldom been models of linguistic propriety. The English we teach began as lawyer's English. 'Standard English' is really 'administrative' English. It emerged in Chancery and the courts and government offices of Westminster at the end of the 14th century as a *written* language fashioned for administration. Some of the clerks in the civil service, such as Chaucer, Gower, and Hoccleve, used this administrative English for poetry in their off hours, and so administrative English very early became literary English. In the 15th century this administrative English was married to the printing press (again beginning in Westminster with Caxton) and begot *mass communication*. Caxton, his patrons in government, and the Tudor pamphleteers who followed them early learned that administrative English extended through the technological resources of the printing press could command masses." [1] As far as Chaucer is concerned, it is true that the excellence of his work lent prestige to an already existing standard; the point to recognize is that he did not make it the standard.

Thus far the emergence of a linguistic standard for England was essentially an unconscious process, a recognition or reflection of an existing social situation. But for the next five centuries or just a little less (which brings us into the nineteenth), London was to maintain its dominance over the English language community. The speech of the ruling classes there came to serve not only as a standard but a model as well, and it is important to differentiate the two. Whereas the characterization of one form of the language as a standard is simply a statement of fact, when we speak of a model we are saying in effect that the standard has acquired such prestige that it is regarded as essential to pro-

fessional performance and to social and economic advancement.

As one can readily imagine, a dialect usually achieves the status of a standard before it becomes accepted as a model, and when it does, we move from the realm of unconscious acceptance to that of conscious prescription. This did not occur overnight, of course. Nevertheless, by the end of the sixteenth century, we find recommended as a model for would-be poets, "The usual speech of the Court and that of London and the shires lying about London within sixty miles, and not much more." [2] This statement is as interesting for what it excludes as for what it includes. Only the counties of Middlesex, Surrey, and Hertford fall wholly within the circle, and it is significant to find the first two mentioned by Puttenham, when he goes on to say that, "in every shire of England there be gentlemen and others that speak, but specially write as good Southern as we of Middlesex or Surrey do, but not the common people of every shire." [3] To go back to our circle, Oxford, Canterbury, and Cambridge were all outside; Reading, just on the line.

Yet we must not be misled into thinking that Puttenham's statement implied an absolute uniformity within the sixty-mile radius, either at the time he made it or over a period of years. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the language of London underwent considerable change, due in part to some extensive shifts in population, principally a movement into the capital from the northern counties. For one thing, Yorkshire had become a center of the wool industry, and as a consequence, well-to-do North Countrymen moved to London and set themselves up as wool merchants. One result of this was to establish the plural pronouns *their* and *them* as standard forms in place of earlier *her* and *hem*. Another was to fix upon the *-s* inflection for the third person singular, present indicative of verbs; *he gives, he keeps* instead of *he giveth, he keepeth*. A third was the acceptance of *are* as the present indicative plural form of the verb *to be*, replacing the earlier *ben*. We learn from this that a standard

language is not permanently fixed, but that it will change in time, usually in response to social pressures of one kind or another.

Nor is any standard language likely to be so firmly fixed as to deny some choice to the individual speaker over a fairly wide range of linguistic usage. The Londoner, living during the reign of the first Elizabeth, had certain choices not available to his twentieth-century counterpart in the time of Elizabeth II. There were two possible forms of the reflexive pronoun at his disposal. The suffix *-ly* might or might not be appended to many adverbs which now have a fixed form. Verbal interrogation and negation could be indicated by either of two types of construction. A choice of personal pronoun in the second person singular enabled him to convey attitudes and emotions which must be signaled in other ways today. The ordering of adverbial elements in a clause was by no means so restricted, nor did the multiple negative construction suffer the opprobrium which attaches to it today. I hasten to point out, of course, that the contemporary speaker has alternatives which did not exist, at that time. The significant conclusion to be drawn is that at no point, in the development of English, was the linguistic standard as absolute and monolithic as is often assumed.

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were pronounced changes in the social structure in England, which again affected the position of the language standard and the way in which it operated. Principally, the power base shifted to add the upper middle class to the already existing establishment. That is to say, mercantilism became as important a source of wealth and influence as land and agriculture, which had hitherto been the principal sources. The result of this shift, continuing to the present day, has been cogently expressed by Nancy Mitford: "There is in England no aristocratic class that forms a caste. We have about 950 peers, not all of whom, incidentally, sit in the House of Lords . . . Most of the peers share the education, usage, and point of view of a vast upper middle class, but the upper middle

class does not, in its turn, merge imperceptibly into the middle class. There is a very definite border line, easily recognizable by hundreds of small but significant landmarks."[4] Just what this so-called vastness amounts to is difficult to say. When Geoffrey Gorer conducted a sociological survey of England some fifteen years ago, only two percent of his sample rated themselves as upper middle class. He conceded that this was probably too small to fit the facts.[5] But even if the figure were extended to five percent, we would then have only a total of some two million and a half to whom the designation might properly be applied, scarcely an overwhelming number who would thus qualify as speakers of the standard language.

But we must return to the point in time when this group first blossomed in its newly acquired dominance. A freshly emerging controlling class is likely to be culturally insecure. The *nouveau riche* merchant, faced with an invitation to one of the country's old and established families, felt a real need to be told the right way to act, to feel, and to speak. He had little faith that his instinct would carry him through a socially trying situation. He wanted guidance, and he wanted it to be as specific as possible. This esteem for rules and regularity during the eighteenth century may, as Margaret Schlauch has remarked, be recognized in the plastic arts, in fashions in clothes, in literary styles, and "less obviously but still with some clarity" in language and attitudes toward language.[6]

As we all know, demand begets supply, and with respect to language, the response was almost immediately forthcoming. It took the guise of a rigidly authoritarian attitude toward language and language usage which often amounted to a denial or negation of the usage of the best writers and speakers, which in turn constituted a disregard of the very forces which had operated and which usually do operate to create and maintain a standard.

We have been aware of this for at least forty years; I need not dwell on it at any great length. The following brief quota-

tion from Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) will suffice: "But let us consider, how, and in what extent, we are to understand this charge brought against the English Language [that our language offends against every part of grammar] . . . Does it mean, that the English Language as it is spoken by the politest part of the nation, and as it stands in the writings of our most approved authors oftentimes offends against every part of grammar? Thus far, I am afraid, the charge is true."[7] Typical catalogues of "the best authors" charged with these improprieties by Lowth and his contemporaries included such names as Addison, Swift, and Pope.

Many of the conventions now accepted and regarded as preferable, if not elegant, were first formulated at this time. Among these are the distinction between *lie* and *lay*, the preference for *different from*, and for *would rather* in place of *had rather*. The rules discriminating *shall* and *will* had a longer period of development, but came into full flower with the grammar by William Ward in 1765.[8]

At this point English enters upon a new phase, namely that of a world language. By 1800 English-speaking settlers had carried the language to America, including the West Indies as well as the mainland, and to Australia. It was becoming the language of governmental administration in India. The nineteenth century saw the penetration of South Africa by speakers of English, and again its extension as the language of government to East Africa, to Burma, to British Honduras and Guiana, as well as to other isolated spots throughout the world. These were the years when the sun set on neither the British flag of empire nor the English language. The empire has dwindled, but not the latter. As the other English-speaking nations grew in power and influence, the position of the language became firmly entrenched. Today, only one other language, Chinese, surpasses English with respect to the total number of speakers, but it is confined to a single continent.

This territorial extension resulted in a marked gain in the

number of speakers. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English had ranked fifth among the European languages as to the numbers who spoke it. In 1750 English was still in fifth place with some nine or ten million speakers. By 1850, it had forged ahead of all the others, as the result, presumably, of the addition of some 23,000,000 persons in the United States for whom it was a first or native language. By 1970 the speakers of English in the United States alone outnumbered those in the home country by a ratio of four to one.

The spread of the language to countries with a physical environment very different from that of England, with their own institutions and folkways, required a considerable amount of adjustment, and each new country made those which the situation demanded. This resulted in even less uniformity within the language than it had to begin with. In the United States especially, the language was affected by the quite different class structure which was developing. Socially, it was not nearly so stratified as England. There was little or no upper class, none in fact with respect to a hereditary position in it. Nor was there the sharp line of demarcation between the upper middle class and the middle class that Miss Mitford has commented on in Britain. Society was a continuum rather than a series of discrete layers, one which permitted as much mobility up and down the social scale as there was movement across the country into the vast open spaces.

As in eighteenth century England, the social mobility made for insecurity, and the demand for guidance on specific points of usage continued. The most popular school grammar in the United States was Lindley Murray's *Grammar of the English Language Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners.* Written in 1795, it reflected the authoritarian tradition characteristic of the eighteenth century English grammarians. Its popularity was immense. It went through some two hundred editions and sold more than two million copies. Murray, trained as a lawyer and successful as a business man, had no philological preparation, nor did most of

his competitors for the elementary school market.

Books on language written for the general public in the United States were just as rigidly prescriptive as the elementary school grammars, and like them were products of the untrained amateur. L.P. Meredith, the author of *Every Day Errors of Speech* (1879), derived his credentials from the degrees of Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Dental Science; he was also the author of a possibly more helpful treatise on *The Teeth and How to Save Them.* The immediate post-Civil War period witnessed the rise of a number of authoritarian language arbiters. One of the most popular of these was Richard Grant White, whose book *Words and Their Uses* first appeared in 1870 and continued to be published well into the twentieth century. Highly urbane and polished, White was the author of musical criticism, studies of Shakespeare, and political satire. He has been described as snobbish, witty, influential, and often unsound. Some idea of the temper of his linguistic judgments may be gained from his characterization of the words *presidential, tangential,* and *exponential* as "a trinity of monsters which, although they have not been lovely in their lives, should yet in their death not be divided." [9]

What I have tried to present thus far is a rapid sketch of the social factors which account for the emergence of standard English, the nature of the demand for a standard, and the veneration which it commands—attitudes which extend to the bulk of the English teaching profession as well as the general public. These matters of demand and attitude cannot be dismissed out of hand. They remain as salient factors with respect to the English language and the way in which it is taught in the schools. But the public concept of the standard may be one thing; the way in which a linguistic standard and a model actually operate can be quite another. We must next turn our attention to the facts in the case.

First of all, one must ask how the current standard is defined or determined. For this there is no source other than actual

usage. The Horatian dictum that use is the sole arbiter and norm of speech has been accepted by everyone from his time to the present, with the sole exception of eighteenth century England, which has already been mentioned. But even so, Horace's statement really begs the question. It fails to tell us whose usage.

This question can be answered only in terms of what we know about the development of standard forms in languages generally, and in English in particular. It brings us back to the origin of standard English, which was administrative English, as John Fisher characterized it, or as Charles C. Fries said on many occasions, the language used by those who are carrying on the affairs of the English speaking world. It is language with social utility in the broadest sense, and as we have already seen, when the social base of the power structure shifted, the standard changed along with it.

Since the late fourteenth century, the time at which London English became the prestige dialect, the composition of the controlling group has changed considerably, especially in the United States over the past century and a half. People shift status more easily and more rapidly than heretofore, and the nature of what we mistakenly equate with the British establishment has widened. We must recall that even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was nothing like total uniformity in the standard language. There is even less at the present time. As Edward Sapir once commented, "The modern problem [of establishing a standard] is more complex than the classical or the mediaeval problem, because the modern mind insists on having the process of standardization take the form of a democratic rather than an aristocratic process." [10] It is only realistic, therefore, to recognize that standard English today will embrace a broad range of acceptability. There will inevitably be numerous alternative and equally acceptable expressions.

The demographic facts argue for this same conclusion, for this same broadening of our vision. Shakespeare's London, the

focal point of our sixteenth century standard, had approximately 250,000 inhabitants, consisting of about five percent of a total English-speaking population of some five million. Today, the United States alone has forty times five million, to say nothing of another seventy-five to one hundred million speakers scattered about four continents of the globe, with the language developing, to some degree at least, in its own fashion in some six or seven countries. Under such circumstances a considerable degree of variation is absolutely unavoidable. There is not the time to examine the differences in the emergent standard in all of these countries, but it will be enlightening, I believe, to compare the situation as it exists in England and the United States today.

This will take us back, first of all, to the distinction drawn earlier in this discussion between a standard and a model. With respect to pronunciation, England has a single dialect—or accent, as they call it—which serves as both a standard and a model. It is often referred to as RP, that is to say Received Pronunciation. It is ruling class or establishment speech, which became fixed as a model through the conformist influence of the public schools (*private schools*, in American terminology) of the nineteenth century. Even today, as A.C. Gimson explains, "The English are very sensitive to variations in the pronunciation of their language. The 'wrong accent' may still be an impediment to social intercourse or to advancement or to entry in certain professions. Such extreme sensitivity is apparently not paralleled in any other country or even in other parts of the English-speaking world." [11] An instance of this sensitivity is reported by Geoffrey Gorer in his *Exploring English Character:* "A young married woman from St. Albans describes herself as: 'just ordinary working class; I can look frightfully "bung ho!" but must keep my mouth closed or else.' " [12] Gimson concedes that with the recent spread of education, situations can arise in which an educated man may not belong to the upper classes and his speech may retain its regional characteristics; nevertheless, those eager for social advancement feel

obliged to modify their accent in the direction of the social standard.

To some extent, at least, this turns out to be a futile gesture, so Alan S.C. Ross reports. According to him, "In England today—just as much as in the England of many years ago—the question 'Can a non-U[pper class] speaker become a U speaker?' is one noticeably of paramount importance for many Englishmen (and for some of their wives). The answer is that an adult can never attain complete success. . . . Under these circumstances, efforts to change voice are surely better abandoned." [13]

A quite different situation prevails in the United States. It is only necessary to think of the wide range of variation displayed by the pronunciation of the current president and his two predecessors, Messrs. Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, all with college degrees, all obviously in a position of power and prestige, each with a speech pattern characteristic of millions. No one of these speech types could be condemned out of hand as nonstandard. To put it in another way, for every detractor of Mr. Johnson's dialect, a thousand Texans would roar their approval of his and attach an equal amount of opprobrium to the accent of the other two. In direct contrast to this, it is reported that Harold Wilson was the first prime minister of the United Kingdom, except for Ramsay McDonald, who was not a speaker of Received Pronunciation.

The British conviction that the socially approved model cannot be acquired beyond the onset of adolescence would be completely unacceptable in the United States. It simply runs counter to our national ethos and egalitarianism, influenced as they are by Rousseau on the one hand, and Horatio Alger on the other.

In matters of grammatical form, however, the British are often more permissive than our practice and far more latitudinarian than our precept. Many Americans feel a sense of guilt about using *have got* to indicate possession, yet one need only recall the lines from *My Fair Lady* at the point where Eliza finally perfects her rendition of "the rain in Spain": "By George she's

got it: I think she's got it," spoken by an expert in the English language, of all things.[14] The opening sentence of a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* discussing the Leipzig Book Fair reads, "But who does the Fair serve." For this to have appeared in the American counterpart of the *TLS* would require something of a stretch of the imagination. The matter was summed up very cogently by Katherine Whitehorn a few years ago when she wrote, "In America, where it is grammar, not accent, that places you, anyone can learn the grammar."[15] Certainly the first half of the statement is an accurate observation, irrespective of whether or not one agrees wholly with the conclusion.

In this same connection it should be observed that few Americans have any measurable degree of confidence in their ability to speak and write the language. Apologies for grammatical imperfection are endemic, extending even to those with a first-class private school and Ivy League university education. Whether the acknowledgments of such shortcomings are sincere or a mere formality is beside the point. The fact that they are said at all is indicative of a somewhat unwholesome state of mind linguistically speaking, and at the same time reinforces Miss Whitehorn's observation about the emphasis upon grammar in the American concept of the standard language.

With respect to vocabulary there are relatively few lexical items in the United States where a word itself rather than the way of life it represents would place an individual in the class structure. *Tux* for a dinner jacket might be one; *supper* rather than *dinner* for the regular evening meal could be another, but this is partly conditioned by the nature of the meal itself, and it appears to exist to a degree in England as well.

There are many more lexical class markers in England. Alan S.C. Ross, whose article, "U and Non-U, An Essay in Sociological Linguistics," appeared in Nancy Mitford's collection, *Noblesse Oblige*, lists at least three dozen.[16] One of these is *table napkin*, upper class, as opposed to *serviette*, non-upper, which according

to Ross is perhaps the best known of all the linguistic class indicators of English. The history of this development is of some interest. *Table napkin* is first cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1564 and has been in continuous use from that time on. Let me point out in passing that the compound form is absolutely essential here, since the unmodified term *napkin* means "diaper" in British English.

Serviette first appears in 1489, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* comments that the older use of the term was exclusively Scotch. It eventually shifted its stress to the first syllable and levelled the original diphthong of the second to a single neutralized vowel. In the nineteenth century it was reintroduced with the French spelling, at first only as a foreign term. The Oxford editor, writing fairly early in the present century, commented, "It may now be regarded as naturalized, but latterly has come to be considered vulgar." This judgment was reinforced by the very latest citation, dated 1906 and taken from a letter of one H. Bland to his daughter: "I think . . . she was the sort who would call a table napkin a serviette."

There is some question as to whether the stigma still remains. Some of my English friends do not consider it as infallible a class marker as Ross seems to have done. Others say it is in approved use for small paper cocktail napkins but not for the larger linen variety used with the dinner service. A definitive answer is very likely not to be had, but the example is valuable as evidence that lexical class markers do exist, and that each one has its individual history.

I shall take some time to examine just one more instance of a lexical class marker in England, again quoting Ross to the effect that "at cards, *jack* is non-U against U *knave*, save in *jackpot* at poker." [17] This judgment is fortified by a quotation from Dickens' *Great Expectations*, " 'He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!' said Estella with disdain." Again a glance at the history of the two terms is enlightening. *Knave* came into the language, or at least

is first recorded in the eleventh century; its use as a term in cards dates from 1568, and it has been used continuously in England ever since then. *Jack*, as a term for a playing card, was used originally only for the knave of trumps and in only one card game, that called *all fours*. The earliest citation for it is 1674. The *Oxford English Dictionary* citations suggest that the game itself was played chiefly by working men. Its extension to other games and to suits other than trump must therefore have seemed an ignorant and unwarranted extension which undoubtedly explains the attitude revealed in the quotation from *Great Expectations*. It is first recorded in the United States in 1845, a time when its class status in England had already been established.

The virtue of these British-American comparisons lies not only in their eloquent testimony that each individual item within the standard has its own history, but also in the demonstration that there is a considerable variation in the linguistic value systems of England and America, not to mention all of the other countries in which English is used natively, and that our judgments on these matters can be exercised only in the light of an accurate and comprehensive record of actual usage. Such an accurate and comprehensive record is not always easy to come by, however; we run into several problems in connection with it, and particularly in attempting to reconcile usage itself with what many of the language textbooks and even the dictionaries say about it.

There are instances, for example, when the rule or proscription runs counter to the actual facts. An instance of this is the widespread disapproval of the verb *finalize*. Its inclusion without a restrictive label in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961), supported by citations of its use by President Eisenhower, Robertson Davies, and *Newsweek*, created a tempest in a teapot. The *New York Times* was especially incensed, objecting not only to its inclusion in the dictionary but to a subsequent use of it by President Kennedy in a news conference.[18] In reply, Dr. Philip B. Gove, the editor of Webster III, pointed

out that the word had turned up "all over the English-speaking world, from the Nineteen Twenties through the Nineteen Fifties in highly respectable places like *Current History, Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Americana Annual,* the *New Republic,* and the *Times* itself." [19] The *Random House Dictionary* in a usage note recognized the forty-year life of the word in an attempt to scotch the myth that it was a quite recent bureaucratic coinage. The *American Heritage Dictionary,* considerably more to the right lexicographically speaking, mentioned the bureaucratic association which the word has for some but omitted the record of it usage. In addition, it reported that ninety percent of the members of its Usage Panel considered the word unacceptable.

Although the attitude toward a word or construction is without question part of the total record of its use, it is not likely that the disapproval of the *American Heritage* panel will have any pronounced effect, although it is unquestionably a comfort to many to see this recorded in cold print. Working against its extinction is the fact of its forty years of use in reputable sources, and the even more powerful circumstances that the addition of the suffix *-ize* to adjectives is not only widespread in English (witness *brutalize, fertilize, solemnize, sterilize, spiritualize*) but one of long standing, going back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. I hasten to say, I have no vested interest in the word; I don't believe I have ever used it except to quote it in contexts like these, but it does furnish an illustration where fact and opinion are considerably at variance. There are many of them.

Another kind of problem occurs when the textbook comments make an insufficient distinction between the usage of spoken and that of written English. An instance of this is to be found in the use of *like* for *as* as a subordinating conjunction, a matter one hesitates to bring up because of the cumulative silliness of the Winston advertising campaign. Again it is not at all a recent development; it originated as early as 1580, as an ellipsis of *like as.* The most careful summary of its use appears in

Margaret M. Bryant's *Current American Usage*. She reported: "*Like* as a conjunction rarely appears in formal written English, but occurs in spoken English and in conversational written English. *As* is the preferred conjunction in formal English, with *as if* and *as though* fairly common variants." [20] This conclusion is based in part upon one study which reported *like* as a substitution for *as* two and one-half times as often in spoken English as in written, and upon another which reported a 92 percent incidence of *as*, compared with 8 percent with *like* in contemporary fiction, newspapers, and periodicals. Much more could be said about the reasons for its greater frequency in the spoken language. but the important point to recognize is that virtually every language differs with respect to written and spoken, formal and informal usage, and any recognition of a standard cannot fail to take this into account.

There are times as well when a so-called rule, that is to say, an attempt at an accurate account of language usage is stated in awkward, or even worse, in logically indefensible terms. This is true, for example, of the conventional rules for the use of *shall* and *will*, according to which *shall* in the first, *will* in the second and third persons, is supposed to be used to indicate simple futurity, and *will* in the first person, *shall* in the second and third, express "a promise, volition, command or threat." The difficulty here arises from the creation of a false dichotomy. The two classes are not mutually exclusive. Futurity is a matter of time; promise, volition, command, and threat are aspects of verbal modality. A statement that something is to occur in the future surely carries a hint of promise, determination, or volition. Most statements of intent refer to actions which are to occur in the future. It is unquestionably true that there is a kind of patterning in the distribution of these auxiliaries, but the rule as it is conventionally stated does not adequately describe it, nor is usage at all the same over the vast expanses of the English-speaking world.

There is a final problem which arises especially in the United

States. It may best be illustrated by an excerpt from a letter which I received not long ago, from a corporation executive who had been present at a lecture which I had given two or three weeks earlier. He wrote as follows, "I appreciate your sharing your expertise with us in the February 13 and 14 conference. I wish to propagate these concepts among our management personnel. To help me reinforce my memory, I would appreciate receiving a copy of your presentation."

There is nothing amiss with the grammar or the structure in what he wrote, but the style is heavy, cliché-ridden, bureaucratese at its very worst, what our English friends often refer to as "the pretentious illiteracy of the Americans." It does pose a problem of the standard language at a higher level, one of taste and style, yet these are real issues and cannot easily be shrugged off.

Any consideration of the standard language must reckon with the outlook for the future. This is especially important for us as teachers. We are told at times that the pluralistic society we are developing in this country will reject the middle or upper-middle class norms and that there is no point in insisting upon them in the schools. Those who have urged the establishment of a functional bi-dialectalism as part of the school language program have been charged with hypocrisy and sometimes worse.

The answer to this, it seems to me, is that the pluralistic aspect of our society is not at all new. It has been with us for some time, and the linguistic standard as it has developed in this country has reflected the pluralism to a degree and will continue to do so. As I have tried to demonstrate, the standard has never been rigidly monolithic. Admittedly, there is somewhat more open opposition to the standard as a standard than there has been before, especially on the part of those sympathetic to the black and other ethnic minorities. The women's liberation forces are even finding a sex bias in the language.

In general, however, these attacks have been uninformed and naive. Some of them restate positions which any competent stu-

dent of the language already holds. This is especially true of those who insist that all dialects possess equal value and have an equal right to their existence as media of communication. As far as I know, no linguist has ever called this into question, but no linguist in his right mind could possibly say that they all have equal prestige, and there is little point in insisting upon the self-deception that they do.

Other critics have searched the thesaurus and have found to their horror that the word *black* has a preponderance of unfavorable connotations, whereas the word *white* is used more often in a favorable sense. This is a fact, but there is little point in blinking it, or in attempting to change it overnight. It is scarcely possible to bleach Grendel's mere to an ash blond color. But the Black Prince does remain a heroic figure, and white-livered is a term for a coward. With the current sensitivity about color, it is fair to assume that euphemisms for those words with an unfavorable atmosphere will develop in the course of time, but history clearly disproves that language can be changed or regulated by fiat. Dictators have attempted it from time to time, with no lasting effect.

But it is far from my intention to end this discussion on a negative note. Standard English, as I have attempted to demonstrate, can be understood only in the perspective of its long development and the forces which shaped it. We must never overlook the fact that there is now, and always has been, more latitude within the standard than the authoritarian mind, or even the average person, was prepared to think. It is equally evident that social utility was the dominant force which shaped the standard at the outset, and that the language has continued to be responsive to the demands of a constantly changing social situation. It is quite within keeping of this concept of its flexibility that it should have operated differently in England and the United States, especially with respect to the features of the language which serve as a model.

22

To the extent that these considerations about the standard language enter into the school program, and there seems to be every reason for them to do so, a sweeping change of attitude on the part of teachers, supervisors, administrators, and parents is urgently needed. In particular we must rid ourselves of the unspoken assumption that a linguistic standard is a form of etiquette, and that school grammar is its Emily Post. This is too narrow and too simple a view of the matter. The vast majority of the rules of etiquette are nonfunctional and in general defer to what Thorstein Veblen once called the law of conspicuous waste. A view of language and teaching procedures based on such a concept will lead only to more of the failures, the anxieties, the faulty and often ridiculous hyper-corrections, and the compensatory pretentiousness that we have already experienced.

For this I would substitute the concept of language as patterned, culturally determined behavior, subject of course to the human tendency to establish prestige-approved norms, but norms which have a latitude and do permit of variation, as most social norms do, and moreover, norms which will reflect the changing nature of the society in which the behavior occurs. I am supremely confident that when not only teachers but all speakers of English in the United States understand these concepts and proceed upon them as a basis, there will be fewer frustrations and greater linguistic capability and achievement.

REFERENCES

1. John H. Fisher, "The King's English in a Working Man's World," *ADE Bulletin*, No. 26 (September 1970), 17.
2. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: The University Press, 1936), p. 145.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Nancy Mitford, ed., *Noblesse Oblige* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), pp. 22, 25. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.
5. Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (New York: Criterion Books, 1955), pp. 39, 49.

S 23

6. Margaret Schlauch, *The English Language in Modern Times* (Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1959), p. 123.
7. Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (London: 1762), pp. ii–iii.
8. William Ward, *An Essay on Grammar As It May Be Applied to the English Language* (London: 1765), pp. 98–100.
9. Richard Grant White, *Words and Their Uses* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1872), p. 217.
10. Edward Sapir, "Dialect," in Edwin R. A. Seligman, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), Vol. V, pp. 125–126.
11. A. C. Gimson, *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (London: Arnold Publishers, Ltd., 1962), p. 81.
12. Gorer, *Exploring English Character*, p. 35.
13. Alan S. C. Ross, "U and Non-U, An Essay in Sociological Linguistics," in Mitford, *Noblesse Oblige*, pp. 84–85. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.
14. From *My Fair Lady*, copyright by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, 1956. Reprinted by permission.
15. Katherine Whitehorn, "What Makyth Manners?" *Spectator*, March 9, 1962, p. 317.
16. Ross, "U and Non-U," pp. 77–83.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
18. "Webster's New Word Book," *The New York Times*, 12 October 1961, p. 28. Also, "Finalized?" 30 November 1961, p. 36.
19. Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times*, 5 November 1961, p. E8.
20. Margaret M. Bryant, ed., *Current American Usage* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1962), pp. 132–135.